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As we prepare to celebrate our Declaration of Independence, we are reminded of its powerful proclamation of freedom.

Freedom includes many things, but at its core is the right to think as we please, believe or not believe as our conscience dictates and live out our convictions openly and peacefully. In other words, freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief is central to who we are.

Yet according to a Pew Research Center study released in August 2011, 70 percent of the world's people live in countries where religious freedom and related rights are severely restricted. These include some of the most repressive environments in the world.

- In China, religious groups that are not approved by the government — from the Falun Gong to the house church movement — are ruthlessly suppressed, while officials crack down brutally on Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims.

- In Iran, an extremist theocracy detains, tortures and executes those who dissent from its dictates. The government targets reformers among the Shi'a Muslim majority, as well as members of religious minorities, including Sunni and Sufi Muslims, Baha'is, and Christians, and its officials aggressively promote Holocaust denial and other forms of hatred against Jews.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom on which I serve has successfully recommended that these and a number of other nations with similar records be designated as “countries of particular concern,” deeming them among the world’s most serious religious freedom violators.

In 1948, the U.N. General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including Article 18, which states the following:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes

freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, alone or in community with others, and, in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

In 1966, the governments of 156 countries signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which includes similar words and which the United States ratified in 1992.

Concerned that these agreements were being flouted and that America’s foreign policy was failing to respond, Congress passed and the president signed into law the International Religious Freedom Act in 1998. The law created U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, as well as a religious freedom office with its own ambassador in the State Department.

In taking this action, our country reaffirmed our own Declaration’s insistence that every freedom, including religious freedom, is an unalienable human right. Research also finds that, across the globe, religious freedom is correlated with robust political democracy, diminished tension and violence, and greater prosperity and stability. In contrast, nations that abuse religious liberty are often incubators of intolerance and extremism, poverty and insecurity, and violence and further repression.

Thus, standing for freedom of religion or belief isn’t just a legal or moral obligation, but a practical imperative, one that is tied to our own well-being and that of the world.

This is especially important in the post-9/11 world, where the key to countering terrorism, along with its tyranny and violence, is to persuade people not to become terrorists in the first place. But in order to succeed, we must offer a competing vision of liberty, one that holds open the real promise of a peaceful, prosperous way forward.

Backed by international law and treaty, made indispensable by our critical security needs and supported by our Declaration, the world's first freedom deserves our steadfast commitment.

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